

KEEPING THE SILENCE

July 9, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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The second lesson this morning is part of a larger narrative called the Elijah Cycle. Elijah was one of the first (many would argue the first) of those strange but important figures in Biblical history called prophets. In many ways he set the pattern and was always deeply revered in the tradition of Israel. When Jesus one time, 850 years later, asked his disciples what people were saying about him, the answer was, "some are saying that you are Elijah." It was meant as a compliment.

Elijah was from the countryside of Giliad. His story is dramatic and interesting. Our text this morning begins on the run, as it were. Elijah has humiliated the King's wife. She has threatened to execute him: he has decided to run for his life.

Scripture

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

I Kings 19:9-15

"...but the Lord was not in the wind;... earthquake,...fire,...and after the fire a still small voice."

-I Kings 19:11,12 (RSV)

Back to the cave this morning. Elijah did what anyone in his or her right mind would do - head for cover. Find a hole and climb in for a while. Hide out till the heat is off.

He had been on an emotional roller coaster. He had gone from unknown rural preacher to King's chaplain, to fugitive on the lam, all within a twenty-four hour period. It's no wonder he ends up in the cave.

Elijah came to King Ahab to warn him about flirting with Baalism - a Canaanite religion which happened to be the favorite religion of his wife, the Queen, Jezebel. He had faced down the Queen's personal cohort of priests, prophets and religious advisers in a dramatic confrontation at Mt. Carmel and in the process managed to alienate and publically humiliate Jezebel. She promised to have him executed, so he ran for it. And after telling God that he had had it, was ready to concede the point and the day to Jezebel and her religion, that he really wanted only to return to the peace and quiet of Giliad where he could resume doing what he was doing when God interrupted him - namely contemplating the nature of the universe

and meditating on God's goodness; on the way out of town he finds the cave at Mt. Horeb and stays the night.

And what a night it was! There was a violent windstorm and an earthquake and fire (sounds a little like Michigan Avenue on Saturday night). But God wasn't in the wind, earthquake or lightening. Afterward, in that eerie calm, that stillness which follows the dramatic cataclysm, God was in a "sound of a gentle stillness." That phrase has traditionally been translated "a still small voice," which I always supposed meant a very soft voice. God still talks, just very quietly so you have to listen particularly carefully. Now the linguists are saying that a far more accurate translation is "a sound of a gentle stillness." That is, there is no voice: there is an absence of voice, a silence. And that is a very interesting proposal - i.e., not that God talks softly but that silence - no talking - bears the reality of God.

When God finally speaks it is a question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and a command - "Go back... Go back to the world."

That was the theme of a sermon I preached on this text two weeks ago. God's people are called to return from the many caves; the protective, secure places, to a life and vocation of faithfulness thoroughly in the world. It's a great text and an important theme and we need to hear it at least once a month because life can be, and often is, so threatening and perilous that you and I are very much tempted to head for the nearest cave.

However, there is another theme here, which asks for some attention if not equal time and it is the very basic matter of God's presence and God's communication with us. The text puts it in a narrative which declares that God is not in the pyrotechnic display - the dramatic natural phenomenon - but in the silence, the emptiness afterward. What an intriguing thought.

The religious challenge in Elijah's day was Baalism, a nature religion which saw God's presence in the mysteries of the natural order, the windstorms and lightning and earthquake, the awesome power and indescribable beauty of nature. Baalism was particularly concerned with the mysterious force of life and the miracle of reproduction. Sexuality and fertility were the focus of Baal theology and ritual.

Now there is a lot of truth to that kind of theology. Life is a miracle. There is no more glorious mystery than human sexuality and if there is one thing our world needs, it is more, not less reverence about the natural order. It's Western civilization with its Judeo/Christian foundation, that is ripping the minerals from the earth, spilling oil up and down the oceans, spewing chemicals into the atmosphere and forcing Southern Hemisphere nations to burn down the rain forests in order to sell cash crops to pay back money they owe to us... It occurs to me that what our civilization needs is a little Baalism. The urgent theological priority for the future is a Christian theology that takes more seriously than ever the old affirmation that God is creator, that creation is God's, and that human responsibility begins with honoring nature, living in harmony with nature.

But Christian thinkers have always observed that while nature points to a creative God and natural beauty touches something deep in the human spirit, nature alone does not get at the mystery of God which Christians see revealed in Jesus Christ. Nature, after all, is neutral and capable of terrible cruelty.

Writing about Elijah's experience in the cave, Old Testament scholar, Davie Napier, comments: "One suspects that the narrative stands as a splendid rebuke to all those nature worshippers who are episodically disposed to make a theophany out of a natural phenomenon from sex to sunset, mountain to sea, rose to artichoke." [See Word of God - Word of Earth]

Israel's faith was not merely a nature religion. God is not fully revealed in wind, earthquake and lightning, dramatic demonstrations of nature's power or beauty - but afterward in the stillness, the silence. And it is to that silence I now draw your attention.

Well, in the first place we don't have much of it, do we? We live in a very noisy place. The whole world is full of human noise, this place particularly - so much so that when we go away one of the first things we notice is how quiet it is. City people are victims of "sensory overload," Professor Wayne Oates said and when I read that I began immediately to think about the irritants that are simply a part of urban life all the time: the saxophonist whose entire repertoire is "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" and who plays it over and over and over, all day long, on the corner across the street... That's not nearly as offensive as the automobile security alarm which is set off in the middle of the day, or middle of the night; or the incredible noise that is generated by the new car stereo systems, or the huge tape players/radios, slung over the shoulder or carried like a loaded suitcase - invading my person with music I do not choose to hear; or the new cigarette boats which cruise the lakefront and sound like a 747 on the runway.

I read a contemporary definition of hell as "being stuck in a traffic jam in a subcompact car, with a huge bus in front belching diesel fumes into the air vents and two semi's on either side racing their engines." [See Oates, Nurturing Silence in a Noisy Heart, p. 8] That's pretty good. My nomination is being stuck in a Lake Shore Drive underpass with a youngster whose blaster is wide open.

A lot of noise simply comes with the territory. People make noise. A lot of people together are capable of making a lot of noise. And sometimes there is a lovely human side to it. The ambulance siren, so much a part of urban life, is a beautiful sound of human love doing everything possible to save life. Over at Northwestern Memorial Hospital there were some major internal renovations going on near the nursery where the premature babies are cared for. A lot of concrete had to be removed by jack hammer. The nurses reported that the premature infants were experiencing an unusual incidence of respiratory and digestive difficulties. The doctors diagnosed it as "noise stress," and it was stopped. The work proceeded at a much slower, quieter and, unfortunately, costlier pace. But it does suggest something of the price which is exacted by our noisy environment.

And so it is no surprise that one of the survival techniques city people must develop is creating privacy, silence, serenity - wherever you are. I am an ex-runner, and what I miss most is the privacy. I feel sorry that the President is now similarly deprived and is accompanied, even on his regular jogging outings, not only by Secret Service Men, but also reporters. The Sony Walkman has done great things for creating privacy, although it does so with more sound. Martin Marty wrote a delightful editorial once confessing that he not only didn't detest his daily commute from the suburbs, but rather liked it. "Cocooning" he called it, on the expressway, alone, in heavy traffic. He writes: "One can do Zen. Engage in reverie. Repent. Resolve. Memorize sonnets. Listen to classical music. Enjoy 'All Things Considered.' Be away from the telephone. Run through a prayer list that keeps growing. Ponder 'tender mercies.' Watch the sun come up over Lake Michigan. Watch the sun go down over Brookfield Zoo." [The Christian Century, 11/25/87]

And Professor Wayne Oates who has written a fine little book, Nurturing Silence in a Noisy Heart advises simply creating silences regularly as a way of caring for your own life. Turn off the telephone, he advises; and if yours doesn't unplug, get one that does. Better yet, he suggests, is the old Quaker discipline called "Compline," a period of silence from 8 pm until 8 am. Oates had tried it and recommends it highly. At first it panicked him - until he discovered the joy of no phone calls, radio, TV, more time for reading, praying and more non-verbal communication, which can be very interesting particularly if you are with someone you like a lot.

The text suggests that silence is not simply the absence of sound. The silence was heavy with content that night outside Elijah's cave. Silence often is. Not all silence is wonderful. Sometimes it is cruel. Lonely people, people who live without family, friends, live in an oppressive silence and frequently turn on television for the very reason that it fills the silence.

A friend, someone said, is that person in whose presence you are comfortable without talking. Time spent with another person in silence can be warm, tender, or it can be sullen, resentful. Silence can be and often is, a way to express a strong anger. Silence can be very manipulative and very hurtful when it deprives one of the simple acknowledgement of one's person. Silence can be thunderous.

And silence can contain the reality of God. That's the intriguing suggestion in the Elijah story, not just God's voice, not just the still background against which God's quiet speaking is audible... but the silence itself reveals God.

Thomas Merton, one of the great mystics and devotional writers of our day wrote a lot about silence. If you love God you will love silence, Merton said. The contrary is that noise making serves to hide our discomfort in the silence.

He wrote: "Those who love their own noise are impatient of everything else. They constantly defile the silence of the forests and the mountains and the sea. They bore through silent nature in every direction

with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse them of their own emptiness." [No Man Is An Island, p. 192]

Silence apparently reminds us of something, at a profound level deep in our hearts. Silence - at a subconscious level of our spirit - reminds us of eternal silence - and so we want to fill it up with sound. But what if the silence is really full of God, as the text suggests. What if we are wrong about the very nature of silence - and that it is not simply the absence of human noise, but the fullness of God?

It might take some getting used to but it is a provocative thought.

The text suggests we might pay attention to the "Sounds of Silence," to borrow Paul Simon's provocative title. Because God is in the silence.

God, after all, is not speaking all the time. When God is not speaking there is the silence of God, the presence of God in the emptiness; and it may just be that knowing that makes all the difference in the world. Few of us, after all, hear God speaking in rich resonant tones. Someone has to be the voice of God in our annual children's musicals. Sometimes the directors choose a rich baritone with a slight Southern accent, and for theological integrity sometimes it's a rich contralto from Milwaukee. But not many of us have ever heard God speak like that unless - as the wonderful story suggests, God speaks in the silence.

Jesus was silent, one time magnificently, bravely, eloquently, when he was standing in front of Pontius Pilate, back bloodied by the whip, thorns pressed into his brow - ordered to speak... "just don't stand there for God's sake - say something," Pilate commanded. And he remained silent. And that silence was thunderous, because it said more clearly than any voice could, any legal protest or theological discovery, that God loves this world so passionately and desperately, and this world needs that healing love so passionately and desperately, and the hope of the whole project, the whole lot of history hangs in the possibilities of that passionate and desperate need and love.

And we are silent when words will no longer bear the weight of our own love, our passion, our grief, and so we touch, or hold each other, or simply stand there with tears in our eyes and a lump in our throat allowing the silence to bear the weight of the moment.

And God is silent when you and I, reeling under the blows of tragedy and disappointment and death, ask, "Why God?" And there is no voice - no thunder - no music - just the sound of a gentle stillness.

There is a lovely line of John Keats:

"I stood tiptoe upon a little hill,
The air was cooling and so very still
and there crept
a little noiseless noise among the leaves
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves..."
[I Stood Tiptoe Upon a Little Hill,
John Keats]

It sounds very much like that ancient account of an event shrouded in mystery but also meaning - The Lord was not in the wind, earthquake or fire - but after - 'the sound of a gentle silence.'

Elijah heard two things in that gentle silence that he had not heard in all the noise of the world; two things he very much needed to hear and which saved his life.

The first was the simple, elemental presence of God in the silence... "I am with you. You need not fear. There is nowhere you can go that I will not be there too." There is no silence - no emptiness - that is not full of God.

The second was the command - "Go back...go back from the cave to the world... from the silence to the noise of life. Take this silence with you. Nurture it, learn to create it where you are, live with it and in it...because I am in it."

Those words could save your life too.

"I am with you, and go back to the world."

It's simply that sometimes you can only hear them in the eerie, empty stillness - the sound of a gentle silence.

Amen.

O God, there is so much noise in our world and in our hearts. Give us silence, silence full of you, silence in which to hear your gracious word of comfort and challenge. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.